

Does Voice Matter?

For Public Accountability, Yes

Samuel Paul

When users of essential but monopoly services do not have the option of choosing an alternative service, can they influence the accountability of service providers through such voice mechanisms as collective action by user groups? Apparently so.



Summary findings

Recent theory posits that accountability in public service can be enhanced by the use of "exit" and "voice" mechanisms.

With exit mechanisms, users of public services can choose alternative sources of supply. Exit mechanisms are viable when there is competition. They are not viable for essential services for which government is the sole provider.

Voice mechanisms are the more likely option when the service provider is a monopoly. With voice mechanisms — for example, public meetings, local representation on public committees, or collective action by user groups — the public seeks better performance from public service providers without opting for alternative sources of supply.

Considerable research has been done on how and whether exit mechanisms improve organizations'

performance and accountability. Little research has been done on whether voice mechanisms make service providers more accountable.

Paul addresses that issue by investigating whether providers of irrigation services in Indonesia were more accountable when the public used voice mechanisms. He asked these questions: Did the use of voice improve public accountability in irrigation services? If accountability improved, did service outcomes also improve? He focused on how voice works and the mechanisms through which it influences accountability.

He found that water user associations did make providers of irrigation services more accountable and that crop intensity increased as a result.

This paper — a product of the Finance and Private Sector Development Division, Policy Research Department — is part of a larger effort in the department to investigate the influence of institutions on policy outcomes. The study was funded by the Bank's Research Support Budget under the research project "Strengthening Accountability in Public Services" (RPO 677-65). Copies of the paper are available free from the World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington, DC 20433. Please contact Bill Moore, room N9-055, extension 35261 (51 pages). December 1994.

The Policy Research Working Paper Series disseminates the findings of work in progress to encourage the exchange of ideas about development issues. An objective of the series is to get the findings out quickly, even if the presentations are less than fully polished. The papers carry the names of the authors and should be used and cited accordingly. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions are the authors' own and should not be attributed to the World Bank, its Executive Board of Directors, or any of its member countries.

